State Library

Francis Rawle

18

William Brooke Rawle

By Francis Rawle

William Brooke Rawle

By Francis Rawle

Reprinted from The Alumni Register
of the University of Pennsylvania
May, 1916

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2017 with funding from
This project is made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services as administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education through the Office of Commonwealth Libraries

https://archive.org/details/williambrookeraw00rawl

WILLIAM BROOKE RAWLE

Lieutenant-Colonel William Brooke Rawle, a member of the college class of 1863, having secured leave of absence from the Trustees of the University, was mustered into the Union Army on December 18, 1862, as Second Lieutenant in the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry. He was then a little more than nineteen years old, an age at which, in these modern days, a youth is usually pursuing his peaceful studies in the Freshman Class. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., has splendidly said of himself, he lived in "a generation whose lips were touched by fire."

This struck the key-note of his whole life. Whatever else he did in life, and he did much that was good in various activities, his first devotion was to the Army—in the war, as a gallant and useful officer, and after the war, as a devoted student of its history.

His active service began in May, 1863, along the Rappahannock. In June he took part in the cavalry battle of Brandy Station, the first battle in which a cavalry corps was engaged as a unit. Then came in quick succession Gettysburg, and after that following Lee back to Virginia, with a skirmish or engagement almost every day; the Mine Run Campaign, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, Cold Harbor, the Siege of Petersburg, Hatcher's Run, the Appomattox Campaign, and finally the entry into Petersburg on April 3rd with the escort to General Grant and General Meade; and then with Meade in the lines of battle from April 3rd to April 9th and the surrender at Appomattox. From May to August he was on Provost Marshal duty at Richmond.

All of this, and much more, was crowded into hardly two years of his young life. There is space to mention here but a single incident. It was on July 3rd at Gettysburg when, in the afternoon, Pickett was making ready his charge on the front of the Union lines on Cemetery Ridge, that Stuart

with more than six thousand Confederate cavalry, moved forward on the right flank to attack the Union line of battle in the rear. He was met by not over five thousand cavalry under Gregg. The situation was critical. If Stuart could break through the Union cavalry line, the road to Meade's rear on Cemetery Ridge lay open to him. It might have changed, one may almost say that it would have changed, the result at Gettysburg. When the fight had lasted for more than three hours with varying fortunes, Stuart brought up his reserves for a last, supreme effort. Hampton's and Fitzhugh Lee's brigades advanced and charged in close columns of squadrons. Custer, at the head of but a single regiment, dashed forward to meet the Confederate cavalry in front, outnumbering him three or four to one. As the advancing Confederate column passed them, Rogers and Treichel, with only sixteen men and five officers, rushed in and struck it on the right flank. Walter Newhall, who had come with orders, joined the little band.

It was then that the supreme moment of his life came to the young Captain, as he was then. With but thirty men of his company he was posted on the slope of Lott's Wood, on the Confederate left flank. Captain Miller, with a like number of men from another company of the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry, was in command of the little squadron. In a letter written four days later, Captain Miller describes what followed: "At Brooke's [Rawle] suggestion, I ordered him to close up the squadron whilst I looked out for a point to strike. * * * We struck Stuart's left flank in rear of his colors and cut him in half, turned the rear portion and drove them like sheep." In the meantime, Custer had met the head of the advancing Confederate column and was fighting it fiercely hand to hand. Scattered men from other regiments charged in with their sabres and soon the Confederates began to give way and were driven back into the woods pursued by the Union Cavalry. Stuart withdrew at dark preparatory to covering Lee's retreat to the Potomac. This cavalry fight has been called the "most dramatic charge of cavalry ever made on American soil." Custer said of it in his report: "I challenge the annals of warfare to produce a more brilliant or successful charge of cavalry." For his gallant feat of arms Captain Miller re-

ceived the Congressional Medal (our V. C.). Captain Brooke Rawle's modesty would never permit his friends to present his claims to the same supreme honor.

On the morning of that same day, at Philadelphia, his Alma Mater conferred upon him his A. B. degree with his graduating class.

He was mustered out at Richmond, August 7, 1865. He was breveted a Major, United States Volunteers, to date from March 13, 1865, "for services at Hatcher's Run, Va. (December 9, 1864)"; and a Lieutenant-Colonel, to date from April 9, 1865, "for services in the campaign terminating in Lee's surrender." He was appointed a Second Lieutenant in the United States Cavalry, but declined the appointment.

With such a life at nineteen, life thereafter might well have seemed to him to be tame by comparison.

William Brooke Rawle was born August 29, 1843, at Philadelphia. He was the son of Charles Wallace Brooke, an able and promising member of the Philadelphia Bar, who died all too young, and Elizabeth Tilghman, daughter of William Rawle, the Younger. He was a descendant through his mother of Edward Tilghman, one of the "Leaders of the Old Bar of Philadelphia," and of Chief Justice Chew. He was fitted for College at Dr. Faires's Academy, a most successful preparatory school in those days, and entered the University in the class of 1863. After he left the army he studied law under his uncle, William Henry Rawle, and was admitted to the Philadelphia Bar, May 18, 1867. On February 7, 1872, he married Elizabeth Norris Pepper, daughter of Henry Pepper, of Philadelphia.

At the Bar his practice was not of an active kind. From the long established Rawle office, founded in 1783, which he entered, he inherited the last of the Penn business in Pennsylvania, and the business of certain historical Philadelphia estates, some of which had passed into the hands of English owners. By reason of his methodical habits of work and his skill in the management of trust estates, he was given charge of large holdings as trustee, rivaling in amount some of the lesser trust companies. Coming to him as the reward for his special efficiency and high integrity, it was a particularly honorable employment.

Outside his professional work, and paying well that duty which every man owes in some sort to the community in which he lives, he took up, in 1872, the work of the Historical Society and all his life devoted himself to it with the keenest interest. He filled various offices until 1900, when he was elected a Vice-President, an office which he held up to the time of his death. For one special reason the Society attracted him more particularly. His grandfather, William Rawle, the Younger, was one of its founders, and William Rawle, the Elder, was its first President. It was the object of his care and devotion for over forty years. He was a natural born collector of material relating to the history of the country and most careful and methodical in putting it in the best possible state for preservation. The Rawle papers were prepared by him and placed on its shelves. His intimate connection, either professionally or by marriage, with the Norris and Hamilton families, and of course with the Penns, gave him a particularly full knowledge of the original papers belonging to those various and important connections. Through him many of them were collected and prepared and found their place in the splendid collection of the Historical Society. A minute of the Council of the Society made after his death said: "There was, indeed, nothing in reason he would not do to further the aims of the Institution, and although he was a busy man, he never considered time wasted which he devoted to the Society. His connection with it was long and noteworthy."

With his army life and his historical tastes, it need hardly be said that he was a constant student of the history of the war between the States, and particularly of Gettysburg—a battle which has perhaps been more discussed than even Waterloo. It was not until some fifteen years after the battle that even the most cursory reference was made to the great cavalry fight on the Union right flank at Gettysburg. In the preparation of the government map of the battlefield, the Official Historian had taken little or no notice of that splendid feat of arms. At last General Gregg, who commanded there, and the officers and men who served under him, took steps to have its history correctly written and to claim the credit which was rightly due them. The official government map of the battle was enlarged so as to bring

in that part of the field. In 1884 a monumental shaft was erected upon the ground, and at its dedication Colonel Brooke Rawle delivered the historical address. It was a permanent addition to the history of Gettysburg. Later he became the chairman of the Regimental History Committee of the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry Association, which compiled the history of the regiment, a valuable and complete work published in 1905. Much of his historical work was done in close touch with the Military Order of the Loyal Legion, of which he was an active member from 1866 until his death. He became a recognized authority in the Commandery in Chief on the law of Primogeniture upon which the new membership of the Legion is based, and upon all questions arising under its constitution.

Another of his important activities was in connection with the venerable Law Association of Philadelphia. From 1879 to 1890 he was its Treasurer and assisted in the difficult task of building up a great law library almost without money. From a small beginning, it became one of the first law libraries in the country.

In the last years of his life he began to withdraw from business and traveled constantly, with health somewhat impaired. One can hardly wonder when one recalls the strain of those two years of struggle in his early manhood. He died on November 30th, 1915.